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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 000330

SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ELA AND DRL/NESCA
NSC FOR PASCUAL AND KUCHTA-HELBLING

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: ACTIVISTS DISCUSS WAY FORWARD ON REFORM WITH
SENATOR LIEBERMAN

REF: 08 CAIRO 2297

Classified By: Ambassador Margaret Scobey for reason 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On February 18, civil society activists and an opposition party leader discussed democratic reform in Egypt with Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-CT), the Ambassador and the DCM. President of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights Hisham Kassem said that over the next 15 years Egypt needs to rebuild its institutions, and is not ready for "instant democracy." Professor Abdel-Monem Al-Mashat of Cairo University described the human rights training he is conducting for student leaders. Director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies Bahey Al-Din Hassan claimed that as human rights movements grew throughout the region in 2008, Arab regimes pushed back and targeted secular activists. Democratic Front opposition party president Osama Al-Ghazali Harb optimistically predicted that if the GOE allowed secular parties a two-to-three year period to develop, these parties would outperform the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in elections. End summary.

GOE Not Ready for "Instant Democracy"

¶2. (C) Hisham Kassem said that Egypt is not ready for "instant democracy," but needs to rebuild its civic institutions over the next 15 years. He called for establishing an independent judiciary, a credible independent news media, a more effective parliament and a stronger prime minister. Policy is made in Mubarak's office, he claimed, and only implemented by the prime minister. Kassem characterized the MB as bereft of grass-roots support, and as an organization that has tried and failed to gain power for the past 80 years. He criticized the GOE as "unaccountable" to the population and asserted that the GOE is focusing on preventing a wider Israeli-Hamas war, instead of "leading the region toward peace," as it did in the past.

¶3. (C) Kassem, founder of the leading independent newspaper "Al-Masry Al-Youm," said that press freedom has improved in the past five to six years, although the GOE would like to roll back this political space. The independent print press has an increased market share of about 25 percent, and satellite television channels broadcast independent content. Kassem speculated that the pro-government press will eventually disappear because it is unpopular and only sustained by government subsidies. He plans to launch his own independent paper in the third quarter of 2009. (Note: Kassem left "Al-Masry Al-Youm" in late 2006. End note.)

Human Rights Training for Students

¶4. (C) Professor Al-Mashat criticized the GOE's argument that it cannot move quickly on democratic reform. He asserted that the "regime never gave people a chance to move forward," and created a competition between the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) and the MB, instead of allowing other parties to develop. He described the 2005 parliamentary vote for the MB as a protest vote against the regime. Al-Mashat opined that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict fuels backing for Islamists throughout the region, and that the MB gained more support as a result of the Gaza War. Al-Mashat described the human rights training he is conducting for student leaders as a way to teach the next generation about democracy. He also noted the progress he is making with civic education training for Imams, and political training for women candidates for the next local council elections.

¶5. (C) Bahey Al-Din Hassan noted that his institute's 2008 human rights report describes a sharp regional deterioration because of a lack of political will from the Arab regimes. Hassan characterized human rights movements as growing throughout the region, but he noted that governments feel threatened and are pushing back. The report asserts that in 2008 Arab regimes focused on punishing secular activists, such as bloggers and independent journalists, who were the main proponents for democratic reform. According to the report, the majority of political detainees in the region (especially in Syria and Tunisia) in 2008 were secular, not Islamist. (Note: The majority of Egyptian political detainees in 2008 were Islamists. End note).

Secular Parties Need Space to Develop

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¶6. (C) Democratic Front opposition party president Osama Al-Ghazali Harb characterized the GOE as "undemocratic, corrupt and authoritarian." He said that the regime, not the MB, is the "biggest problem" facing Egypt. According to Harb, authoritarian regimes such the GOE can crush any forms of resistance other than Islamist movements. He predicted that following a two-to-three year transitional period allowing for secular parties to develop, these parties would defeat the MB at the polls.

¶7. (U) Codel Lieberman was not able to clear this message before departing.
SCOBAY